

October 18, 2004

ADVISORY

SUBJECT: Postponement of the 19th Plenum of the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs

For the second time in the past six months, the American Chairman of the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs (USRJC) has found it necessary to postpone the Commission's 19th Plenum. Both postponements have been caused by disarray on the Russian side associated with post-election reorganization within the Russian Government.

BACKGROUND

In March 2004, the Russian people elected Vladimir Putin to his second term as the President of the Russian Federation. Almost immediately following this election, the Russian Government began a detailed and thorough reorganization of the Presidential Administration and the ministries within the Russian executive branch of government. This has resulted in the elimination of numerous positions, staffs, and individuals from the government's lineup.

For months before the March Russian presidential election, the U.S. side was planning to host the 19th Plenum of the USRJC in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. The U.S. side considered this plenum, scheduled for May 26-27, 2004, extraordinarily important, since the Joint Commission had not met in plenary session for 18 months,¹ and many issues had accumulated. Reorganization-associated disarray on the Russian side, however, made it impossible for the Russian delegation to receive permission from the Presidential Administration to travel to Germany, and the U.S. side reluctantly decided to postpone the 19th Plenum, re-scheduling it for November 9-10, 2004, in Washington, D.C.

In May 2004, Mr. Jennings and Congressman Sam Johnson signed a joint letter to President Putin urging that the Russian Government retain the staff of the Joint Commission during its government reorganization. The American Ambassador in Moscow, Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, strongly endorsed this letter and the positions taken in support of retaining the Russian staff.

In summer 2004, two developments—one positive, the other quite negative—affected Commission operations. In June, 2004, President Bush appointed the Honorable Jerry D. Jennings as American Chairman of the USRJC. This positive development, however, was countered on the Russian side by the elimination of the staff supporting the Russian side of the USRJC. This office, located in the Presidential Administration, was closed and its six staff members were dismissed by July 2004. Though the Russian structure of commissioners (47 in all) remains in place, the staff through which the U.S.

¹ The 18th Plenum was held on November 18, 2002, in Moscow.

side works routinely to accomplish its mission in the Russian Federation has ceased to exist.

On July 8, 2004, Mr. Jennings invited 20 Russian commissioners and technical experts to attend the re-scheduled 19th Plenum in Washington from November 9-10. He secured the agreement of his Russian counterpart, General-Major Vladimir Zolotarev, to support this plenum, and the U.S. side completed all the complex administrative, logistical, and substantive arrangements for this plenum. Recognizing the increased time required to secure U.S. visas in the post-9/11 environment, the U.S. side established late September as the deadline for processing visa applications for Russian attendees at the November plenum.

Despite repeated American appeals, by mid-September the Russian Presidential Administration still had not given its permission for a Russian delegation to travel to the United States for the 19th Plenum. During his visit to Moscow from September 19-23, 2004, Mr. Jennings raised this problem with senior Russian officials, calling for an early decision on this question. He sought support from a number of influential Russian officials, including his Russian counterpart (General Zolotarev), senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs officers, several Deputies of the Russian State Duma (the lower house of the Russian legislature), and well-connected leaders of two large Russian veterans organizations. Most importantly, he met with a senior official of the Russian Security Council and received from him an assurance that a decision on dispatching a Russian delegation to the 19th Plenum would be forthcoming quickly. With these assurances in hand, the U.S. side finalized its plans for the plenum.

NO DECISION

On October 8, less than one month before the Russian delegation was scheduled to depart Moscow to travel to the 19th Plenum, the U.S. side still had not received notification that a Russian delegation would be permitted to travel. Even if a decision had been forthcoming immediately,² the U.S. side judged that the time remaining to process visa applications was not sufficient to guarantee the receipt of U.S. visas for Russian attendees in time. Good stewardship of the U.S. Government funds required postponement to avoid committing the government to a sizeable expenditure in forfeited reservations.

Mr. Jennings decided on October 8, 2004, to postpone the 19th Plenum a second time. He dispatched a letter to General Zolotarev, including copies to all officials with whom he met in Moscow in mid-September, advising the Russian side about the postponement.

Mr. Jennings has proposed convening the 19th Plenum in Moscow in May 2005. This timeframe and venue offer two advantages. First, holding the plenum in Moscow will preclude the need to arrange travel by the Russian side of the Commission. Secondly,

² As of the date of this advisory, the Presidential Administration still has not authorized travel by the Russian delegation.

the Russian Federation will be celebrating the 60th anniversary of victory in World War II in May next year. This would be a favorable time for the Commission to convene in conjunction with this celebration, and it will position the U.S. side of the USRJC to facilitate participation by American veterans groups in these World War II celebrations. The U.S. side hopes to benefit from favorable publicity for the work of the Joint Commission among the Russian public during this timeframe, and it also hopes to advance a number of issues that have accumulated since the 18th Plenum. Planning already is underway on the U.S. side for the May 2005 convocation of the 19th Plenum in Moscow.